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A Balcony in Search of Six Characters

Cindy Bestland

Existentialist philosophy embraces Nietzsche's claim that "God is dead," and in so doing challenges the world to seek meaning elsewhere. Absurdist playwrights cling to this notion as a delightfully bizarre basis from which to aggressively question the conventions of theatre and language; and by extension, of life itself. Ironically, the absurdist approach to a God-less theatrical world often places its inhabitants in rather surreal existences which swell with the pervasive presence of a greater being, an "other."

Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author and Genet's The Balcony resound with a struggle by the characters to exist in light of the absence or presence, respectively, of this "other." The struggle further complicates with the characters' dual citizenship to the world as defined by their subjective realities, as well as to the larger world beyond its confines. Pirandello and Genet use their characters to suggest a means of endurance [in Camus' sense of the word] in relationship to the "other," and through co-existence within two sets of reality.

In Six Characters, Pirandello addresses endurance in the presence of a greater being in terms of an absent author. The six characters are defined by the author who created them, but also by their search for a replacement author. The Father explains that the original author no longer exists: "The man, the writer, the instrument of the creation will die, but his creation does not die" (Act 1). His explanation, when coupled with the experience of the actors, serves to suggest a parallel between the creator-author and a God figure. The script from which the actors play is found in the "book." Since the "book" reverberates with an importance and truth throughout the play (the quotes further emphasize its greatness), it takes only a minor stretch to set this great book as a metaphor for the Bible. It follows, then, that the author of any "book" possesses the creative capacity of a God. The Father's statement that their author is dead rings with the Nietzschean concept of a dead God.

Just as Nietzsche would suggest that we humans must find a meaning beyond God and all of the conventional securities associated with Him, Pirandello forces his characters to seek alternative meaning, which ironically must come in the person of another author. They exist only in the abstract until an author records their play -- thus giving validation to their existence, "a meaning which the [creator-] author never thought of giving [them]" (Act III).

Yet the question arises as to what kind of existence the six characters in fact experience. The Father explains, "We try to substitute ourselves for this faith, creating thus for the rest of the world a reality which we believe after their fashion, while, actually, it doesn't exist. For each one of us has his own reality. . ." (Act 1). Theirs is a subjective reality, where only that which is written by the creator-author can be fully realized. Despite the father's claims of individual reality, though, freedom of choice remains impossible. The Son, who tries in the third Act to leave the scene, finds

himself trapped in a predetermined role. The play must go on to completion without deviation.

Logically, the concept of Free Will takes center-stage in assessing Six Characters. In a world where there is no author, no God, it would seem that Free Will would be the ordering factor for the endurance of the characters. Yet, none of the six characters is able to alter their prescribed paths of life. I would suggest as a resolution to the lack of Free Will, that the determinacy ruling the lives of the characters, as set up by the play, works in two ways. First, it serves as a metaphor for existing structures of society (even their selective society of the play/life within larger society) which must be dealt with. Second, and more simply, the fatalistic nature of the characters' existences mirrors life in the basic fact that we too are trapped on a continuum which proceeds, ultimately ending only with death.

A final issue to consider regarding endurance in Pirandello's Six Characters involves the juxtaposition of the rather artificial world of the play, defining the lives of the characters, with the "real" world surrounding them. It is truly ironic that the standard of reality is embodied by the manager's world -- the world of the theatre, an un reality by definition. The characters struggle to reconcile their roles within the two settings. They face opposition from the manager, who dismisses them as living an illusion. He is soundly challenged by the Father, who maintains, "We . . . have no reality outside of this illusion . . ." (Act 3). Whether reality or illusion, it can not exist without the manager's world. It may be equally "real" -- whatever that means in theatre of the absurd -- but decidedly dependent.

Genet's characters in The Balcony struggle to endure through means quite different from Pirandello's. While Pirandello's six characters face a world where their creator is dead, resulting in a quest for alternative meaning, Genet's characters survive in the presence of a manipulative, overly pervasive (dare I say omnipotent?) "other" in the person of Irma. Everything that happens at The Grand Balcony bears the mark of Irma's influence. She helps provide costumes and props for the visitors, while maintaining an eerie Big Brother-ness. (Her gender is decidedly questionable!) The chief rightly accuses her: "You've got secret peep-holes in every wall" (48). She watches and facilitates the fantasies, secure in her privilege of distance -- earning more and more money with each visit.

Irma's oppressive presence affects the rest of the characters in The Balcony in much the same way as the non-presence of the author in Six Characters. Both sets of characters turn to an alternative form of reality necessitated by the nature of the "other." Without a creator-author, the six characters must compensate by establishing a new mode of existence based upon the play already written, as well as upon an author as yet to be found. With Irma as detached but ever-present, the prostitutes and visitors must find some sense of meaning within the alternative reality Irma has created. Carmen explains that "Entering a brothel means rejecting the world.... Your [Irma's] mirrors and orders and the passions are my reality" (41). As with the six characters, it is useful to evaluate the character of this new reality.

If the six characters are locked in a predetermined existence according to the script, surely Carmen and the participants of Irma's brothel must enjoy greater freedom. It would seem probable that

spontaneity rules the chambers where fantasies are made to order. Yet, Free Will does not exist here either. The brothel becomes the script by which the men and "girls" are ruled. The visitors can only live out their desired identities within the surreal boundaries of the House of Illusions. Similarly, the prostitutes must resign their daily lives to playing characters, or rather non-characters, in order to satisfy a lonely man's libido and thirst for power.

It is undeniable that both the men and the "girls" are tied to each other in the reflexive roles of manipulator and manipulated. On the one hand, the men manipulate the girls through the obvious means of money and power. Money paid for fantasies provides the girls' salaries, while the threat of losing it proves a forceful tool for the men. Also, due to the nature of the profession, the men have physical power of strength through beating or tying, as well as emotional power gained from the status of Judge or General or Bishop. Yet, on the other hand, the girls have the ultimate manipulative power to fulfill or to deny the illusionary identity, depending upon their willingness to play along. The Judge pleads, "You [thief] won't refuse to be a thief? That would be wicked. It would be criminal. You'd deprive me of being" (14)!

This sense of the characters' being inextricably bound together shows up in the language of The Balcony with the multiple references to being tied (see endnotes referring to pages 9, 13, 15, 29, and 79). The tying is of course an exercise in power relating to bondage, but it also serves as a unifying element. Irma and Carmen are "tied" together (29) and further tied to the chief -- with all of the implications of a sexual, as well as an emotional, as well as a financial threesome. Tying further serves as a means to link the whores, visitors, Irma, and the Chief as an entity existing within the confines of The Grand Balcony -- an invented existence surviving within and against the outside world.

It is this warped sense of solidarity which segregates the brothel from the outer world at the beginning of the play. While the six characters couldn't exist without a "real" world (that of the actors and manager), Genet's characters seem to exist in defiance of it. It is the separateness of the two realities that gives The Balcony its power as a statement of endurance. Outside in the "real," acceptable world looms the perversity of war, an aggrandizement of the male drive for power and glory as embodied in "a prick of great stature" (78), the Chief of Police. Inside of The Balcony, lives a different perversity, thriving on the male need for victory in power relationships, which can only be realized for the men beyond their everyday lives.

For them it becomes a question of identity. Within the haven of The Grand Balcony, each man can face the difficulties of life by not facing them. It is a sort of denial of reality which forms the basis of a new reality. Hamlet says, "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (Act 2, scene ii, 249-250). Nowhere does this become more true than in the merging of the two realities. The cross over of the inhabitants of the two worlds (Bishop, General, Judge, and Queen to the outside world; Chief and Roger to the inside one) results in a confusion of identity, magnifying the blurred line between the Balcony's reality and the reality outside it.

Genet uses two recurring devices to illustrate the merging of realities: the scream and the machine gun fire. During the fantasies of the Bishop and the General, the action is interrupted by very real screaming. This

serves to intensify the absurdity of the brothel, forcing the realization that the pain within its walls is in fact real; it is not just a game. The screams additionally haunt *The Balcony* in their reminder of the pain of war beyond its confines. Machine gun fire invades the fantasies in much the same way. It is a direct intrusion of real violence upon the "pretend" violent acts played out in the fantasies.

The tenuous link between the characters and their two realities in *The Balcony*, as well as in *Six Characters*, chill the reader with their implications. In order to endure in a world without a God, we too must first define the nature of a substitute force, an "other." Pirandello's and Genet's others take radically different positions of involvement in the lives of the characters, who form the center point in the tug of war of two worlds of reality. The authors, I think, suggest in their respective plays that endurance is possible, but in a relative sort of way.

Endnotes

9) Irma: "Untie his [The Bishop's] laces."

13) Stage direction: "A woman, young and beautiful, seems to be chained, with her wrists bound."

15) Judge: "We are bound together, you, he and I [Thief, Executioner, Judge]."

29) Irma: "He's [The Chief of Police] going to turn up, if he turns up . . . fit to be tied!"

29) Irma: "Yes, we, because you're [Carmen] tied up with me. And with him [Chief of Police]."

79) Bishop: ". . . we're now tied up with human beings, tied to you, . . ."